



National Museum of Health and Medicine

Otis Historical Archives

OHA 326 Swift Collection

Date of Records: 1898-1930s

Size: 1 Box

Finding Aid: By Eric W. Boyle (2015)

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Biographical Note: Dr. Earl Reed Swift was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1873. His daughter recalls that he came from a family which “had little in worldly goods but a deep respect for education.” His mother graduated from Mt. Holyoake Female Seminary during the Civil War, at a time when few women had the opportunity to pursue higher education. His father graduated from Oberlin College, but was forced to leave his white collar job after a nervous breakdown and, upon medical advice, he turned to farming, for which he reportedly “had little temperament and which brought little financial reward.”

Young Earl Swift received his B.S. degree from Olivet College in 1897, and with the help of a \$75 gift from his mother’s sister he went for one year to the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor, working for room and board. To earn enough money to continue with his medical school education, he taught mathematics and science for three years in the high school at Traverse City, Michigan, where he met his future wife, Mary Elizabeth Crysler, a fellow teacher. Swift returned to Ann Arbor in 1901 and finished the last three years of medical school. He received his M.D. degree in 1904, rating ninth out of a class of about 150.

Swift married and started a modest medical practice in the village of Coleman, Michigan but on the advice of a drug salesman, who told Swift that the city of Comstock’s only elderly doctor was expected to retire imminently, Swift and his family moved to the tiny village just four miles from Kalamazoo. The elderly doctor did not retire, and Swift was forced to supplement his medical work by falling back on his farm experience to support his family.



Swift's medical records from 1914 to 1916 show that his medical charges were modest and the payment slow, if indeed he was paid at all. An office visit cost 50 cents, 75 cents with medicine, and \$1.00 total with exam. House calls cost \$1.00, plus another 25 or 50 cents for medicine, and \$2.00 with dressing. An obstetric visit cost \$10.00, antitoxin \$5.00, and circumcision \$5.00. As township health officer he put up and removed placards warning of quarantine for contagious diseases like measles and scarlet fever at a cost of \$1.00 or \$1.50 depending on the distance required to travel. Dr. Swift's total cash receipts from December 1914 to July 1916 come to some \$565.50 and his unpaid charges total about \$333.65.

In 1916, he began to advertise for a practice elsewhere and a former classmate from Lakeview, Michigan provided him with the opportunity he desired. While Swift's family remained in Comstock due primarily to its educational advantages, Dr. Swift became a full-fledged "general practitioner" in every sense of the word in Lakeview. Obstetrician, pediatrician, podiatrist, optometrist, geronologist, surgeon, anesthetist—he brought babies into the world, cared for family members from children to the elderly, prepared and dispense medicine, regularly fitted glasses, performed minor operations, and gave the anesthetic when his colleagues performed major operations.

Dr. Swift's daily schedule unfolded as follows: in the morning he would go to the hospital to administer anesthetics for operations, or make house calls into the country for a radius of about 20 miles; at noon he'd have dinner at in Lakeview, from 1:00 to 4:00 he would hold office hours for patients, and from 4:00 to 6:00 he usually posted a sign in the office that read, "Gone to farm, back at 6:00." His charges were slightly more than in the Comstock days, but remained modest. An office visit cost \$1.00, house calls \$2.00, and an obstetric visit \$25.00. His bills were filed on slips of paper like old grocery bills in a wooden box. A small record book listing illnesses and their treatments shows that Dr. Swift kept up to date by taking notes from current medical journals on new ideas for treatment. A true country doctor, he remained faithful to his patients throughout his life as a practicing physician.

Series/Scope and Content Note: Items in the collection belonged to Earle R. Swift, M.D. (1873-1958). Items include photographs, a license, a ledger, and a notebook of prescriptions, as well as a short biography written by his daughter. These materials were accompanied by a doctor's bag and instruments which are housed in the NMHM's Historical Collections.

BOX AND CONTENT LIST

Box 001:

00001: Ledger, E.R. Swift, Comstock, MI (1914-1916)

- Includes a list of names with dates, numbers of calls, and corresponding price for approximately 45 people. Also includes 3 pages of entries from the period when he was Health Officer for Comstock Township which document the placing of disease-



warning placards, removal of placards, and fumigations.

00002: "Record" Book: E.R. Swift, Lakeview, MI (1916-1936)

- Includes list of prescriptions classified by disease as well as: 1) step-by-step descriptions of topics like the "Jones gastric diet," the six meal diet, care and feeding of infants, anti-freeze mixtures, anesthesia in obstetrics; 2) summaries of medical journal articles on subject including narcotics, renal function, lobar pneumonia, ovulation and conception, standard treatment of early syphilis; and 3) specific treatment of things like cranial and intracranial injury in the new born, tonsillectomy, diabetic coma, varicose veins, and burns.

00003: Photographs

- E.R. Swift, Ann Arbor, MI, 1898
- E.R. Swift, Lakeview, MI, ca. 1930s

00004: E.R. Swift Biography, by Katherine L. Swift (6 pp.)

00005: Certificate of State Medical Examination, Michigan, 1904